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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the evaluation of a rural school district in Pennsylvania and offers recommendations reflecting the district's goals for school improvement and construction. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to identify curricular needs of the district and individual schools; review and assess district facilities with respect to technological capacities and attendance area needs; and identify school construction needs and options. Dilemmas facing the school district include a changing rural economy, tension between the county's city and outlying rural areas, a professional organization that operates efficiently but disempowers nonprofessionals, and a centralized system that facilitates delivery of services but raises barriers to initiative and diversity. These dilemmas have resulted in conflict between the school board and school personnel. Before educational change can be initiated, board members and school staff must establish and foster a variety of working groups in order to overcome fears and factionalism and to identify strengths of the county's unique diversity. The report includes conclusions about the district's educational resources and financing, educational administration, school community relationship, educational technology, educational facilities, and curriculum. In addition, the report offers specific recommendations for educational improvement related to staff development, integration of academic and vocational education, a school-to-work program, distance learning technology, a marketing plan for vocational-technical education, equipping outlying schools for computer technology, local school advisory groups, expanded strategic planning, expanded curriculum, and construction and renovation of educational facilities. (LP)

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Systematic Research and Evaluation in a Rural Pennsylvania School District

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Background of the Study

The District sought consultant services in connection with the District's renovation and construction program. The District expected the consultants to help translate the Board's policy objectives into design criteria, with curriculum and educational delivery systems being a primary thrust of the study. The primary purpose of the study, then, was to evaluate the District's current educational program and recommend appropriate educational program options that address the District's needs in view of the Board's intention to keep most schools open. The degree to which technology might play a role in the District's educational program was also explored, with an emphasis on the potential of technological innovations to improve the quality and efficiency of the educational program.

Study Assumptions and Activities

Study Assumptions

This is a study of difficult, real-world dilemmas. As the AEL study team considered these dilemmas, the team operated under a number of assumptions, including these:

- Current Board policy and appropriate state regulations apply.
- The current attendance area populations will remain relatively stable over the next five years.
- No absolutes exist. That is, all options and ways of addressing the District's needs will be reviewed and considered by the AEL study team.
- Information will be collected from all interested stakeholders, with no particular role group carrying disproportionate weight.
- Information collected from all participants will be valid representations of their views.

- Activities and reporting will be conducted with input and direction from the study oversight committee.
- The findings and recommendations resulting from this study will serve as an impetus for decisions concerning the District's school improvement process.
- The AEL study team will provide a comprehensive study within the limits of the given resources.

Study Objectives/Activities

Objectives. This section describes the project with respect to the activities conducted. Three objectives were outlined in AEL's proposal to conduct the study:

Objective 1: Identify curricular needs of the district and individual schools

Objective 2: Review and assess the district facilities with respect to technological capacities and attendance area needs

Objective 3: Identify and qualify construction needs and options

Activities. Activities related to these objectives included the following:

- Review local and state documents.
- Conduct focus group interview with School Board of Directors.
- Convene and catalyze stakeholders.
- Revise the tentative evaluation plan.
- Survey and/or interview teachers and administrators.
- Meet and interview local business people.
- Survey current and former students of the District.
- Conduct site visits to selected school sites.
- Conduct interviews with facilities management staff.
- Survey parents.
- Review, compare, and recommend the most appropriate curricular options.
- Review, compare, and recommend the most appropriate technological options.
- Review, compare, and recommend the most appropriate construction options.

Dilemmas Facing the School District

Rural schools and school districts are facing pressures that have caused them to reach a critical period. Declining rural economies, the expansion of expectations for educational services, the erosion of the population base resulting in dwindling tax bases, and increased state demands are examples of the dilemmas facing rural schooling. These community factors often lead to rural school district instability.

Bryant and Grady (1990) discuss four primary sources of rural school district instability:

1. The school organization itself is poorly constructed or operated.
2. School personnel are incompetent and continue to perpetuate incompetence.
3. The wider community has reached a state of instability that reflects itself in the performance of the school district.
4. The demands of state agencies produce particular dysfunctionalisms for the rural school districts.

The dilemmas facing the District, in the view of the AEL study team, are less associated with the first two than the latter two. A way of thinking about these particular dilemmas follows.

A dilemma is a contradiction, but *practical dilemmas* exist in reality and not just in logic. That means they cannot be dismissed or even resolved. You have to live with them; you have to appreciate them. They are part of your identity. It's incumbent on us humans not only to *live with* our dilemmas, but also to help each other thread a course among them.

Living with dilemmas, unfortunately, is not an American virtue, and the dilemmas that beset the District are sharply etched. The American tendency, according to Larry Cuban, a professor at Stanford University and a former (urban) superintendent, is to mistake dilemmas for problems. It's an easy leap from mistaking problems to finding mistaken solutions. The solutions might be saleable,

but without dumb luck they just don't work. Threading a course through dilemmas is much harder work, but ultimately it's more successful and more rewarding. *When people solve problems, they forget about them. When people manage dilemmas they learn something.*

Some of the *practical* dilemmas that seem to beset the County School District at the moment are characterized below.

> *First dilemma.* In the past, life in the County was good. Times are different now, and there is a feeling that things are no longer so good. This means people fear the future because it is certain to be different.
>
> *Second dilemma.* Unlike many rural areas, the County has its own city, which is not just a center of trade, but an actual manufacturing center. This is an economic blessing, because it has created what might be called a favorable balance of trade. But cities are in tense relationships with their rural areas. The tensions that exist between Pittsburgh and the rural areas around it, for instance, can be found in microcosm in the County.
>
> *Third dilemma.* The school system is efficiently managed and operated by a very professional and dedicated organization. This means, as it does most places where this is the case, that those outside the profession can—and often do—feel powerless.
>
> *Fourth dilemma.* County school districts centralize authority and facilitate delivery of services, especially on an equitable basis. But centralization and equity can raise barriers to initiative and diversity (both of which are traditions among the County's communities).

These dilemmas *are not* separate phenomena. They form a single phenomenon and they represent the history and identity of the County: its commitments and values, its institutions, its communities, its people. To misconstrue all of this as some problem in need of a solution is to deny the County (and the district, the communities, the people, and what they value) their identity *in one another*.

These dilemmas seem to have spun off two destructive cycles of action: fear and faction. Both are symbolized by the differences between the School Board of Directors and the school

professionals. Given the combined dilemmas, fear and faction are not only understandable but may be inevitable.

The first thing *to do* is hardly anything: just stop thinking of the situation as "a problem." The next thing to do is the real work: start threading a way—or multiple ways—through the dilemmas.

But there's a prior need before that real work can begin. Levels of fear need to be reduced, the first of which seems to be fear of the future. Fortunately, the future usually looks a lot like the past. The County has a solid middle- and working-class history to build on. In lots of rural places the middle class has long since vanished. There is no reason it should vanish in the County; the economy is remarkably diverse, something that cannot be said of many rural places. People need to get on with defining what they want the future to look like and working toward it. In short, some changes need to be anticipated and embraced. This is as true for schools as for industry. There might, in fact, be some common ground (just as there *should be* some important distinctions).

The second sort of fear has to do with the morale of educators, which seems to have sunk with the advent of the new Board. This is understandable. The Board members are messengers of the community, not just its representatives. Educators need to hear the message; they need to *appreciate* that the Board was elected for good reason having to do with the identity of the district and the County—that is, with their own identity. The Board, however, needs to *appreciate* that teachers and administrators care for their kids. Neither group is made up of strangers, and, therefore, neither group can really be the enemy (no matter how strong the fear).

The Board and the professionals need to establish and foster (nurture, facilitate, support, assist) a variety of talkative working groups. There are lots of "models" around for this sort of thing, but it is always very hard work. The objective is to overcome fear and factionalism and to discover

and use the strengths of the County's very unique diversity. What is needed is persistence and courage, and it looks like the County would be a really good place to find those qualities.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are not in any priority order and do not suggest degree of importance.

- Resources from state and federal governments appear to be level at best in the immediate future. Current uncertainties regarding state and federal funding may complicate budgetary decision making. At current spending levels, the District will face significant financial difficulties in the foreseeable future.
- Utilization of a grant writer for purposes of identifying and obtaining additional external resources is prudent on behalf of the District.
- The District has implemented a number of positive and appropriate cost saving strategies.
- There is a strong no-new-tax climate in the County.
- The limited financial capacity of the tax base in the County proves to be a significant barrier to increasing local revenue.
- The reality of the current economic and occupational conditions in the County suggests that the District will need to strive to "do more with less."
- The positions fostered by the current School Board of Directors reflect great concern for local preference.
- There appears to be an inadequate communication network between and among key stakeholders.

- A certain degree of community apathy is apparent; perhaps as a result of not wanting to "rock the boat."
- Controversy concerning various educational issues is inhibiting and overshadowing well-intended efforts to achieve a quality education for students in the District.
- The lack of consensus among the District's governance and administrative personnel has contributed to a general condition of low morale among professional educators and some community members.
- There appears to be some viable options for consideration of school consolidation.
- In general, most facilities in the District are in good repair.
- Many facilities in the District have limited capacity for implementing instructional technology.
- Distance between schools and the geography of the County will remain a challenge to the District.
- A great deal of pride in the community is exhibited by the appearance of the school facilities.
- The concept of deconsolidation does not appear to be a viable option at this time.
- Many facilities in the District do not comply with guidelines and regulations regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
- The District central office administrative structure and compensation are appropriate and in line with those in similar districts, as are principals' compensations.
- It is anticipated that enhanced and focused professional development for educators will be needing to effectively accomplish desirable changes for students in the District.

- There appears to be a need for increased collaboration between and among professional educators.
- Greater advantage needs to be taken of particular areas of expertise among the professional educators in the District.
- The personnel evaluation system is relatively weak for assessing performance and improving instructional practices that best meet the needs of students.
- There is a lack of clarity regarding the use of technology and how technology is incorporated in the District.
- Inadequate resources are available at the present time for large-scale implementation of instructional technology.
- There does not appear to be a plan for incorporating the District's Career Center into a district wide technology initiative.
- There is a lack of clarity regarding the application of technology in response to curriculum equity concerns.
- There is little appreciation regarding the role of technology for connecting schools and communities, or for giving the community access to information via their schools.
- The appropriate use of technology could address many problematic issues being experienced in the District.
- It appears that the community at large, and some educators, make no distinction between instructional technology and computer literacy.
- The strategic planning process implemented in the District is a thorough and potentially useful one.

- Senior students articulated clear learning preferences.
- Survey data suggest that students feel least prepared in thinking/problem-solving skills.
- Transportation time and negative images limit vocational education opportunities.
- Fiscal and administrative demands related to special education needs are burgeoning.
- Programming for students identified as gifted is limited.
- Opportunities for learning real-world skills are limited.
- Students could benefit from a wider variety of appropriate instructional strategies.
- It seems apparent that some duplication exists in the content of courses at the secondary level.
- Inadequate integration exists between the academic and vocational programs.
- There seems to be a lack of parental/community and student involvement in curriculum planning.
- Students seem to need more information, guidance, and support regarding course selection for career decision making.
- Curriculum planning seems to make little use of already available data regarding student preferences and performances.
- The concept of basic skills is poorly defined and communicated between and among key stakeholder groups.
- The community has defined basic skills as including computer literacy.
- A majority of community members believe that it is important to offer nonacademic life skills in the District, ideally integrated with other classes and not at the expense of academic skills.

- More effective provisions can be made for gifted children, but at modest additional cost.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are not in any priority order and do not suggest degree of importance.

- Foster initiative among teachers and principals by decreasing bureaucracy. Encourage risk-taking. Learn from mistakes of self and others.
- Integrate academic and vocational education throughout the school system by collaboratively involving educators, business leaders, and the general public in strategic planning and implementation.
- Build a school-to-work opportunities system relying on the traditional success of the Career Center and incorporate a comprehensive community-based career guidance system. The career center could be the catalyst for creating a school-to-work opportunities system for all students in the district. This means that the center could be the focal point particularly for accomplishing the work-based learning and connecting activities components of a school-to-work opportunities system. Consequently, the center would function in collaboration with the five attendance area schools to build the system, and use its strong business linkages to better connect "schooling" to workplace realities. A one-stop shop approach to career guidance information is needed for students and adults in the community to prepare and/or retrain for the modern workplace. All students in the district, and many students in the local communities, need assistance in career planning. The local rural economy is under transition and jobs of the future will

likely be different than those experienced by many residents. Moreover, all educators need better access to career guidance information to help students make desirable educational and career choices. The Career Center could serve as the catalyst for developing an electronic, community-based career guidance system in the district.

- Develop and provide greater flexibility in vocational education offerings at the Career Center for students to develop prerequisite academic skills and broad-based technical occupational skills that result in maximum preparation for entry-level employment or postsecondary education following high school. Students in the district must be given opportunities to pursue vocational-technical courses without committing to a total morning or afternoon block of time. A course of study for many students could include a "technical" course, but not a "vocational program." Many students who are planning to enter the professions could also benefit from an integrated academic and technical course of study.
- Develop a strategic plan for vocational-technical education in the school district to complement the one developed for the Career Center, with leadership for development provided by parents, businesses, educators, labor representatives, and others from the respective attendance areas. Action plans should be created for each attendance area with periodic review to gauge implementation success.
- Explore ways to utilize distance learning technology in linking the Career Center with other elementary, middle, and high schools in the district. Building a school-to-work opportunities system will require much more contact and collaboration among all schools

in the attendance areas and the Career Center. Telecommunications technology should be explored for this purpose.

- Develop a marketing plan for vocational-technical education that addresses the negative image of "vocational education" and clarifies the changing focus of workforce education programs that require prerequisite academic skills and that provide up-to-date employability skills reflective of the modern workplace. This should not be simply a "recruitment plan" for Career Center, but an action plan explaining the new vision for workforce preparation in the district.
- Encourage professional development opportunities for teams of academic teachers, vocational teachers, and school counselors to observe and experience together applications of school subjects in the workplace. Much more collaboration among all educators and selective team-oriented professional development opportunities will be needed to successfully implement an education strategy that best meets the dual needs of students and business and industry.
- Devote appropriate resources to retrofitting outlying schools for computer technology.
- Establish local school advisory groups to provide input to professional educators and communicate with all key stakeholders.
- Consider combining the six current elementary schools in the city attendance area into three facilities. One viable option appears to be for establishing three K-5 centers, one or two of which would be new facilities and one of which would result from additions and improvements at one of the elementary schools.

- Develop curricular focus at District high schools (for example, by reflecting local preferences, eliminating duplicative offerings, and providing telecommunication among high schools).
- Explore alternative scheduling designs to maximize staff utilization and building space. Eliminate study halls as currently implemented.
- Enable consistent leadership in each school. Assign professionals and allow them to foster relationships in each building. Assign full-time principal in each building.
- Maintain, support, and improve small schools in less affluent communities.
- Rethink the prevalent definition of equity as access to course offerings. Involve stakeholders.
- Proceed with caution when embarking on large-scale technological advances. Do so only after reaching a high level of consensus about uses and expectations.
- Establish supportive environments that allow all educational roles to evolve in the best interest of students. Anticipate change.
- Foster the development of an educational culture that values respect, habits of mutual understanding, and appreciation for the common good.
- The School Board of Directors and the professional educators must establish and foster mutually nurturing, supportive, and assistive relationships. Consider professional development opportunities for both professional educators and Board members that will facilitate these relationships.
- Optimize the use of County's strengths and diversities, rather than focus on personal world views and preferences.

- Continue to prepare and develop a more effective personnel evaluation process, including refinement and revision of job descriptions.
- Enhance professional development efforts. While costly in some respects, focused professional development in concert with other good practices can result in improved student success.
- Prioritize building maintenance needs, with special considerations for instructional effectiveness, safety, and compliance with ADA regulations.
- Aggressively pursue other funding resources for meeting the identified educational needs. These include—but are certainly not limited to—grants, donations, foundations, partnerships, and collaborative ventures with other schools and districts.
- Continue to implement and investigate use of effective fiscal management strategies such as contracting services, aggressive energy conservation, computerizing management functions, refinancing debt, using volunteers where appropriate, establishing effective community partnerships, enhancing communication with the community regarding fiscal considerations, and exploring consortia for specialized services.
- Review current voting districts for election of school board members. Three other options are available besides the current one being implemented.
- Regard the middle-school concept critically; recognizing that instructional practices, not buildings, is the key. Many of these practices are appropriate in principle at other levels, for example, learning by doing, flexible scheduling, interdisciplinary instruction, team teaching, and so forth.
- Continue to use and expand a strategic planning process.

- Seek help in facilitating change processes and establishing criteria for success.
- Establish procedures to accelerate gifted students so that most complete high school by age 15, 16, or 17 instead of age 18. Techniques include grade-skipping, cross-class placement, special rapid-paced courses, dual enrollment options, and others.